Foreword

Michael Balint (1896–1970) was a well-known and often cited psychoanalyst who started his practice in the United Kingdom in the 1940s. He had a profound influence on the patient-centred approach and the consultation in clinical practice. This influence initially had its impact on practising GPs through the formation of Balint groups. Later, Balint's work was a key influence in developing vocational training for general practice.[1]

The importance of the doctor–patient encounter and the teaching of communication skills has rightly been extended to undergraduate teaching and is a recurrent theme in the General Medical Council publication, *Tomorrow's Doctors*.

In this paper, the authors describe the considerable changes that have taken place in general practice, from the formation of the NHS to the present. They explain how today's climate may be compromising the complex interactions within the doctor–patient relationship. These cannot easily be defined and measured but were demonstrated by Balint to be so important in relation to overcoming illness and achieving optimum health.

The paper revisits the continuing challenge of each individual doctor–patient relationship and the need to reflect and balance the needs of patients and doctors in an NHS being increasingly driven by targets of possible limited applicability to general practice. By focusing on the detailed examination of a Balint group on one vocational training scheme (VTS), the research described in this paper succeeds in making a substantial contribution to examining the educational processes within small groups. It should considerably inform the debate about how small-group work in general practice training could be strengthened by a reconsideration of its aims, how it is organised and facilitated, and how individual learning needs should be taken into account.

Reference
[1] Royal College of General Practitioners. *The Future General Practitioner: Learning and Teaching*. London: BMA, 1972.

Dr Rodger Charlton MD FRCGP FRNZCGP
Editor, RCGP Publications